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Educating our teachers: a straightforward and uncontroversial task?



Dr Aileen Kennedy, the School of Education
University of Strathclyde

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POLICY BRIEF

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Educating our teachers: a straightforward and uncontroversial task?

Dr Aileen Kennedy, School of Education, University of Strathclyde

Abstract:

Teacher education might seem at first glance to be uncontroversial: we've all met teachers and we all know what they do; the job is straightforward and the 'training' is well established. However, behind this assumption lies an intriguing and complex web of aspirations, demands and global influences. Indeed, the education of teachers, far from being uncontroversial and straightforward, is in fact hugely contested and subject to considerable political influence.

I A clear global policy direction

Teacher education policy in Scotland, as elsewhere, is influenced heavily by a global policy agenda which is driven by supra-national bodies, principal among them the OECD and the EU. This agenda is based on the premise that teachers are the key variable in enhancing pupil outcomes. This premise is supported in much of the policy solution-focused literature (e.g. the so-called 'McKinsey Reports'), but can be disputed in relation to research on wider social policy in the Scottish context, which suggests that 'who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend' (OECD, 2007, p. 15). Nonetheless, the global policy trajectory builds on the notion of teachers as the key to enhancing outcomes, suggesting therefore, that a principal route to improving a country's economic performance is through enhancing the capacity and capability of its citizens, and that the key way to do that is through improving the quality of teachers.

Within this overall 'meta-narrative', a number of policy solutions seem to be gaining popularity internationally, including: the development of teacher professional standards; a drive towards masters-level education for teachers; enhanced partnership between schools and universities focusing on the development of 'clinical practice'; and a greater emphasis on what is variously called 'evidence' or 'enquiry' based teaching. The prioritisation of these policy solutions illustrates underpinning purposes of teacher education that focus more on socialisation and the development of human capital than they do on so-called 'subjectification' purposes which focus more on the development of individual creativity (see Kennedy, 2014).

Another issue gaining prominence in many countries is a sharper focus on the quality assurance or measurement of individual teacher quality. While in some countries this is facilitated through the use of standards-based appraisal approaches, in other places – most commonly in several

US states – the use of so-called ‘value-added teacher evaluation’ approaches is gaining in popularity. This approach rates individual teachers in relation to their pupils’ attainment on standardised tests, arguably factoring in and accounting for differences within pupil populations. It is heavily focused on improving economic output, with most proponents focusing on the economic evidence which associates highly scoring teachers with the improved earning capacity of their pupils over their subsequent lifetime. Strong objections have been raised to the ‘value added teacher evaluation’ approach, however, arguing that it disproportionately disadvantages teachers of children and young people who are already disadvantaged, e.g. in terms of poverty, race, social class, thereby discouraging ‘good’ teachers from working with such learners.

II National responses and ‘problem borrowing’

The Scottish response to educating its teachers has been to simply accept the ‘problem’ as articulated in the global policy discourse, and to seek to address it through a Government-initiated wide-ranging review of teacher education across the career-span: ‘The Donaldson Report’ (Donaldson, 2011). The opening paragraph of the Report states that:

Over the last 50 years, school education has become one of the most important policy areas for governments across the world. Human capital in the form of a highly educated population is now accepted as a key determinant of economic success. This has led countries to search for interventions which will lead to continuous improvement and to instigate major programmes of transformational change. Evidence of relative performance internationally has become a key driver of policy. That evidence suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the foundations of successful education lie in the quality of teachers and their leadership. High quality people achieve high quality outcomes for children. (Donaldson, 2011, p.2)

While the above quote comes from a report in Scotland, it could just as easily have come from any other country world-wide, developed or developing, such is the power of this global meta-narrative. While policy-*borrowing* suggests importing a solution from elsewhere to a different local context, Scottish teacher education policy suggests a tendency towards ‘*problem-borrowing*’. Nowhere in the Donaldson Review is there a clear exposition of the current problem(s) with teacher education, and even in those countries where teacher education policy is explicitly framed in relation to national performance in international comparison tests such as PISA¹, the problem-identification stage tends to be no more sophisticated than to

¹ PISA is an international programme of assessment of the achievement of 15 year old pupils in maths, science and reading. It is organised by the OECD and includes both member and non-member countries who sign up voluntarily (at cost). It claims to provide internationally comparable indicators of pupil achievement and is designed to help focus educational policy. The design, implementation and comparability of results are coming under increasing criticism by academics in many parts of the world, yet the popularity of PISA as an international league table of achievement remains high among Government policy-makers.

assert that there are problems with teachers and teacher education as evidenced by pupil outcomes on tests such as PISA.

III Problems with a *problem-borrowing* policy approach

- In terms of teacher education policy, Governments tend to prioritise human capital and national economic performance over social justice and creativity, thus influencing the perception of what might be deemed to be 'problematic' in current policy.
- PISA (and similar international benchmarking exercises) is only one, increasingly disputed, measure of pupil 'outcomes', capable of identifying only a narrow set of 'problems' in any particular country.
- Problem-borrowing tends to be based on very limited and discrete type of evidence: cross-national comparisons of pupil attainment on standardised tests (which may, or may not actually be culturally transferable), reports by supra-national organisations based on national government data and, increasingly, policy solution-focused reports by global consulting firms. At the same time, academic research tends to play a much less prominent role in framing and shaping teacher education policy reform; and it is certainly not as well-funded.

IV Substantive global policy challenges in teacher education

The issues raised above suggest three inter-connected challenges for teacher education policy:

1. **Social justice and/or economic success?** While a commitment to enhancing social justice is not ignored entirely in teacher education policy, it certainly appears that a focus on national economic success take priority. There are serious questions to be asked not only about short-term priorities and their longer-term impact, but also about means of developing teacher education policy that supports *both* priorities effectively.
2. **Global and/or local problem?** The tendency towards *problem* borrowing, brought about by increasing global connectedness, raises challenges for countries as to how they 'frame' and investigate their own policy challenges. This, of course, also raises the issue that the identification of problems with teacher education will always be set within the context of wider national priorities.
3. **Measuring teacher quality:** Regardless of the national priorities that are set, currently there are no sufficiently sophisticated measures of teacher quality, either at individual or national levels. In order to resist managerialist, performative and potentially discriminatory solutions, there is a need to develop a range of measures which do not rely *solely* on pupil attainment on standardised tests.

V Conclusions

Teacher education policy in Scotland illustrates one particular enactment of what has increasingly become a global policy trajectory. While in some parts of the world, including England, a more overt, centralist and managerial approach has been taken to mandating policy reform, the current Scottish direction reflects historical and cultural ways of working, notably resulting in what might be termed 'network governance' (Kennedy & Doherty, 2012). However, while governance approaches might vary from country to country, the ultimate aspects of contestation remain remarkably similar: managerial, performative approaches which support economic-driven values, versus profession-led, democratic approaches which reflect a commitment to improving and enhancing the lives of *all* children.

References

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Learn more

Professor Pasi Sahlberg warns of the 'Global Education Reform Movement' (GERM). The GERM is identifiable through five common features, namely:

1. standardization of education via outcomes-based policies;
2. a focus on core subjects at the expense of social studies, arts, music and physical education;
3. a search for low-risk ways to reach learning goals: experimentation and risk-taking is reduced when high-stakes tests are prioritised;
4. the use of corporate management *models* as a main driver of improvement, focusing on economic rather than moral goals;
5. test-based accountability policies.

Read more about this analysis in: Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York: Teachers College Press.

See also: Zhu, X. & Zeichner, K. (Eds.) (2013). *Preparing teachers for the 21st century*. Springer: London

About the author:

Aileen Kennedy is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Strathclyde, The focus of her work is on the broad area of teachers and teacher education, and more specifically, concentrates on the study of teacher professional learning and teacher education policy and reform.

Contact details:

Dr Aileen Kennedy

School of Education
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS)
University of Strathclyde
Lord Hope Building
141 St James' Road
Glasgow G4 0LT

t: +44 (0)141 444 8061

e: aileen.kennedy@strath.ac.uk

International Public Policy Institute (IPPI)

McCance Building, Room 4.26
University of Strathclyde
16 Richmond Street
Glasgow G1 1XQ

t: +44 (0) 141 548 3865

e: ippi-info@strath.ac.uk

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